

Theaters & Performing Arts Companies



THE PLAY'S THE THING: THEATERS AND PERFORMING ARTS COMPANIES IN HAMPTON ROADS

All of Hampton Roads is but a stage and the theater companies merely players that strut across it. Yet, what a stage it is! The area's companies provide a rich menu of thought-provoking and entertaining productions, all of which enhance the region with vital cultural and economic benefits.

The vibrant community of thespians in Hampton Roads premiered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries at venues like The Academy of Music, and the American, the Colonial and the Wells theaters, where vaudeville mixed with drama and the emerging moving picture amusements. In fact, in the early days of the 20th century, Norfolk was viewed as the cultural "gateway to the south." A brief decline into adult entertainment occurred in several of these theaters during the middle of the 20th century, followed by a slow and deliberate emergence into a healthy and engaging theatrical life.

Currently, the theatrical venues of Hampton Roads boast several major professional companies, a changing plate of smaller community performing companies, and a host of universities and colleges stretching the diversity of dramatic selections. Whether supported by magnanimous corporate sponsorship, dedicated avocational passions or the hobby of a few rich patrons of the arts, local theater contributes significantly to the revitalization of Hampton Roads communities.

THE WELLS THEATRE

Since opening in 1913, the historic landmark New Wells Theatre welcomed guests into an ornate and exquisite venue of beaux-arts classicism, originally seating 1,650 with a top balcony "For Negro Audiences Only." It once featured "Ben Hur," with chariots on treadmills, and hosted the likes of Fred and Adele Astaire, Will Rogers and John Philip Sousa. Its decorative magnificence matches its status as a premiere professional theater, with full equity players.

Recently renovated, the 640-seat Wells is home to Virginia Stage Company (VSC), Hampton Roads' only fully professional regional theater company. The intimate and beautiful facility attracts more than 80,000 theatergoers a year, who spend approximately \$6 million on tickets, food and refreshments when they attend.

In the recent past, the VSC experienced some financial hardships, even with a budget near \$2 million. In the 2004-05 season, it brought on Chris Hanna as artistic director and Keith Stava as managing director. Their vision for the VSC has provided solid financial ground to support its artistic vision. Additionally, during this past year, the VSC beat national averages for nonprofit theaters by increasing individual ticket sales, growing its subscriber base and retaining 84 percent of its previous year's subscribers (compared to the national average of 73 percent). Hanna and Stava focused on bringing financial stability back to a company in a precarious state without altering its genuine artistic mission.

Since 1979, the VSC has carried on a tradition of high quality drama in the Wells Theatre. Seeking to develop and



sustain southeastern Virginia's fully professional theater, the VSC presents the substantial and challenging works of significant playwrights. Believing that both the theatrical arts and art education contribute a vital and necessary component of a prosperous society, Hanna and Stava provide the community with a place for patrons to enjoy, explore and celebrate issues of personal and social meaning through the experiences of live professional theater. A new artistic focus is the generation of the King Lear project, an integration of classic theater and Hampton Roads. By combining Shakespeare with the oral histories of elderly residents, a new script actually emerges based on the interactions.

While the VSC sees the greater Hampton Roads area as its audience, it, like other theater companies, has been attempting to capture the attention of the growing urban population of Norfolk through a variety of advertising techniques – a DVD season brochure, blog, e-mail newsletter, and cooperative marketing with other arts groups such as Chrysler Hall and the Virginia Ballet.

The VSC ensures its high standards by providing a professional wage to actors, directors and designers and through hands-on oversight from Hanna and Stava. In fact, the upcoming season at the Wells promises both intense drama and rollicking parody as "Elephant Man" and "To Kill a Mockingbird" share the headlines with the Reduced Shakespeare Company's "The Complete History of America (abridged)."

HARRISON OPERA HOUSE



Originally erected in the 1940s as an entertainment site for USO troops and known as the Norfolk Center Theater, the exquisitely renovated Harrison Opera House houses the "official opera of the Commonwealth," the Virginia Opera Company. One enters the spectacular twin-towered façade into a magnificent grand foyer, with cantilevered three-story balcony lobby, breathtaking floor-to-ceiling windows and box seating on both the mezzanine and balcony floors.

Under the direction of maestro Peter Mark, the company has come off a phenomenal 30th anniversary season, offering five performances each season at the Harrison Opera House, with frequent trips to Richmond's Landmark Theatre and the George Mason University Center for the Arts in Fairfax. As one Inside Business writer quipped, "This is not your mother's opera company." This impressive "the-

atre of the fabulous" blends challenging scores, intricate choreography and strategic mise-en-scène into exquisite performances in classic musical/theatrical integration. The financial situation exploded from bleak to a brighter, even rosy, surplus between 2001 and the present.

With an annual budget of more than \$5.5 million and 30 full-time staff, the company's economic health has been significantly enhanced by excellent performances, long-term strategic planning and a more savvy approach to customer service. The general director and CEO, Paul "Gus" Stuhireyer III, also aimed at grass-roots strategies, seeking to attract more family interaction. Through its education department, with Student Nights at the Opera, matinees and a touring program for young artists, it engages 200,000 children yearly. Free evenings like the Operatini Nights and Operalnsight provide a fertile context for young professionals to mix and mingle at the opera house.

According to Thomas Costello, development director, "This is an organization that is growing. With growth comes change and that creates challenge." As another executive acknowledged, its balanced budget is a healthy condition that allows the company to take risks.

Aesthetically, the 31-year-old nonprofit organization Virginia Opera Association stretched its vision to include "Brundibar," the evocative performance of children imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. Even with spatial restrictions, lavish productions like artistic director Peter Mark's culturally expansive "Romeo and Juliet," with the casting of two superb Chinese singers, takes

the “raked stage extending beyond the proscenium arch.” Mark’s visionary leadership has allowed an economic and cultural exchange with China, with the production of Puccini’s “Tosca” at the Shanghai Opera.

CHRYSLER HALL

Where the Wells Theatre aspires to art, Chrysler Hall follows the classic Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland inspiration to put on a show! Seating 2,500 in the orchestra, dress circle and balcony, the wonderfully glitzy Broadway shows attract an annual audience of 80,000. A high level of patronage is generated by the imported Broadway shows that contract spectacular stars in touring musicals and comedies.

Chrysler Hall generates fiscal benefits for the city of Norfolk by drawing people to it and to nearby thriving downtown restaurants. These venues not only enrich the quality of life for citizens and draw visitors to Hampton Roads, but they also contribute to the economic bottom line. A 2003 H. Blount Hunter study indicated that Norfolk’s “net fiscal impact was equal to almost 3.3 times its original investment in arts grants.” Designed as well for concerts (Virginia Symphony) and forum lectures, the elegant Chrysler Hall is known foremost as the site of the popular Broadway at Chrysler Hall series. When the sound system works, observed critic Bob Arthur, “it produces a magnificent acoustic experience.”

Last year, as a prime example, a remodeled auditorium and restructured stage showcased the majestic and truly innovative national touring company production of “The Lion King.” Audiences were literally awestruck by this visual and musical feast, which garnered enormous praise for the ingenious stagecraft of director Julie Taymor. The play became what critic Mal Vincent called “theatre at its most inventive.”

The Broadway export topped \$5 million, demonstrating that it and other recognizable hits like “Phantom of the Opera” and “Les Miserables” attract devoted audiences, and at the same time solidifying the centrality of theatrical production as community entertainment. Another outcome is that restaurants, hotels and local businesses all share in the financial bounty.

AMERICAN THEATRE

As one of the unrivaled premiere performance venues of Hampton Roads, the intimately classy American Theatre in downtown Phoebus/Hampton boasts state-of-the-art acoustics and direct sightlines in its restored historic setting. From its origins in 1908 as a high-class moving picture and vaudeville house, it was eventually extensively renovated by the nonprofit Hampton Arts Foundation. Supported by the cities of Hampton and Newport News, the American Theatre welcomes guests with its signature plush red velvet cushions and comfortably designed chairs, offering intimate viewing (with no seat more than 75 feet from the stage) for 400 audience members on the main floor and in the balcony.

This well-preserved landmark imports international talent to provide a most adventurous and innovative year-round program. The dynamic and droll artistic director Michael Curry steers the compelling and truly remarkable program with an annual budget of around \$1.5 million. Musicals like “The Song of Mulan” and the Family Fun series with “Rumpelstiltskin,” Charles Dickens’ perennial favorite, “A Christmas Carol,” “Fred Garbo Inflatable Theatre Co.” and the electric “Lazer Vaudeville” complement the theater’s diverse bill, which also includes first-class road shows. The productions are, in the words of Curry, “intimate, ethnic and cutting edge,” with no one else doing the kinds of impeccably polished shows available at the American. As Horace characterized the art of poetry, the works both teach and delight. The theater’s extensive and inclusive offerings serve up classical music and



comedy, as well as "Macbeth" performed by the superbly talented Acting Company. As part of the educational mission of the American Theatre, the cast of such plays remains after the performances to answer questions and engage the audience in lively and enlightening sessions on the craft and mechanics of theatrical productions.

The sterling quality of performances at the American augurs well for the cultural vitality of the Hampton Roads theatrical scene. In particular, it is the exemplary vision of Michael Curry and his staff that has established this solid and highly respectable institution.

WILLETT HALL

In residential Portsmouth, Willett Hall invites diverse acts, ranging from the Christian Comedy Tour and the Duquesne University Tamburitzans, a multicultural song and dance company, to musical dramas like "The Cheaters" (by the I'm Ready Productions), into its spacious, but inviting auditorium. Willett Hall is a 2,000-seat entertainment facility with superior acoustics that features concerts, nationally known guest speakers, theatrical performances, musicals and dance. It boasts, in particular, an incredible acoustic experience and an intimacy with the stage; the last row of seats is only 175 feet away. Even supported by the marketing of PortsEvents, however, few events are booked for 2006-07 in the grand theater, which remains dark most of the time. Its future is cloudy.

KAUFMAN THEATRE

Tucked away in the Chrysler Museum of Art one finds the George and Linda Kaufman Theatre with its 375 seats. Often working with events like the Old Dominion University Film Festival, it also hosts Alice Wamsley's charming Tidewater Musical Theatre. This group offers light operetta and sophisticated children's fare, such as perennial favorites "The Secret Garden" and "Anne of Green Gables."

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE THEATERS

The prolific and fruitful budding of young thespian talent in Hampton Roads is due in large part to the thriving work of local universities and colleges. Every year, fresh amateur stock appears out of educational institutions to replenish a dynamic talent pool, frequently propelling gifted performers to New York and Hollywood, from award-winning actress Glenn Close (William and Mary) to "Arrested Development's" Tony Hale (Regent). These academic programs not only educate and train students, but they also offer entertainment to their respective communities.

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

The most enduring and reputable program is rooted in Williamsburg, at the College of William and Mary. Long respected as the collegiate leader of regional performing arts, the Department of Theatre, Speech and Dance is housed in the classic Phi Beta Kappa Memorial Hall. Significant for its students is the incomparable excellence of a rich liberal arts education, grounding dramatic opportunities in one of the best educational programs in the country.

Named for the prestigious national honor society established in 1776 at William and Mary, the Phi Beta Kappa Hall's main-stage offers a traditional modified proscenium stage with apron and hydraulic orchestra lift, extensions and a "sprung" wooden floor with trappable opening allowing for sudden entrances (and exits) from below. Its classic stage atmosphere features 486 orchestra and 277 balcony seats. A second studio theater, essentially a black box with 109 seats, provides a laboratory classroom for acting and directing, as well as rehearsal space. Fully equipped scenic design shops for costumes, lighting, computer technology, drafting, carpentry, painting and construction provide a solid base support for the department's curricular programs.

Although faculty salaries are paid by the college, the shows must be self-supporting. Thus, as office manager Christopher Robbins acknowledges, shows tend to be less daring and more popular, since they must make a profit. The most popular of programs remains the Virginia Shakespeare Festival performances.

Sponsored by the Department of Theatre, Speech and Dance and using Phi Beta Kappa Hall as its venue, the Virginia Shakespeare Festival (VSF) sells about 400 seats per performance. Employing true talent, with guild professionals joining local journeymen, VSF consistently presents the Bard in all his glory, wit and pathos, and creatively advances adaptations as in "Illyria," an upcoming musical version of "Twelfth Night." In addition, Robbins indicates that the VSF also seeks to market "family friendly Shakespeare," enriching the imaginations of young audiences.

The VSF's general budget hovers around \$225,000 annually, for which it produces three main stage shows during the summer season. As with other academic institutions, the major expenses for the 50-member company revolve around sets, costumes, lighting and for contracted talent. Approximately 70 percent of the funding comes from ticket sales, concessions, program advertising and tuition for camps, with the other 30 percent coming from individual contributions and grants. Even in its devotion to a classical theater tradition, the VSF points to its financial feasibility: studies conducted by the Business Council on the Arts concluded that "for every dollar spent on the arts, eight more dollars are generated in the community in other revenues, demonstrating that the arts are a good investment." While this particular estimate suggests a multiplier of unprecedented magnitude for cultural expenditures, and therefore is suspect, there is little doubt that cultural expenditures ripple throughout the region.

FERGUSON CENTER AT CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT UNIVERSITY

Christopher Newport University's impressive new facility, the Ferguson Center for the Arts, has catapulted it to the top of Hampton Roads competitive theatrical venues. Its inaugural season of 2005-06 splashed onto the front pages of local entertainment sections, highlighted by entertainers like Vince Gill and Andrea Bocelli performing in the 1,700-seat Concert Hall. Importing various world-class touring performances, ranging from chamber music to the best of Broadway shows (with Cathy Rigby as "Peter Pan" and Michael Crawford in "Phantom of the Opera") and comedians including Bill Cosby, the center's executive director, Bill Biddle, stipulated that its gross ticket sales placed the center among the top 10 venues in the country with fewer than 2,500 seats.



The Ferguson Center's amazingly huge structure, marked by modern décor and comfort, also provides a home for CNU's Department of Theatre and Dance. With active collaboration among professors, professional theater artists and students, the program is the fruit of university President Paul Triple's vision to build an artistic corridor in Newport News. Thus, commercial presentations are utilized to enhance the educational work of the school, with Broadway shows and senior recitals sharing space and attention. Each year, four ambitious mainstage productions are complemented by another three to five second stage productions, seeking to appeal to numerous groups. CNU theater director Steven Breese explains that the theater program seeks to attract a vast variety of audiences from the area's diverse and growing constituencies. What the administration recognizes is what Breese calls "the theater effect," namely the commercial impact that a vital theatrical program has upon the rejuvenation of the entire Peninsula. The Ferguson Center leads the community in inspiring redevelopment plans. Both high-quality faculty and eager students have been attracted to the world-class venue and program, fulfilling Triple's prediction that "If you build it, they will come."

The refrain ringing out at Ferguson is "only at CNU," a recognition that the university provides unparalleled opportunity for students to perform on a grand public stage with state-of-the-art technology and to engage world-famous performing artists. Recently, for example, a student was chosen to sing with famed tenor Bocelli. A crucial ingredient to its productivity is the university's decision to underwrite the performing arts program through a healthy student activity fee, liberating it to create theater and appealing to both broad and narrow audience segments. No longer is intercollegiate athletics the only activity to benefit directly from student fee revenues.

ARMSTRONG HALL AT HAMPTON UNIVERSITY

Under the supervision of Karen Ward, Hampton University provides a terra firma foundation for the performing arts through its Department of Fine and Performing Arts. Seeking to broaden the artistic and technical talents of its undergraduate students, it aims to merge academics and creativity, inculcating the rich cultural heritage of Hampton University. With both performance and technical theater majors, Armstrong Hall provides entertaining and provocative works, from the likes of Tennessee Williams and Harold Pinter. The Hampton University Players and Company, serving both the university and the surrounding community, runs its theatrical performances. However, performances are sporadic, partially because the program is limited by a small number of faculty. The potential to do more is apparent.

ROPER CENTER AT TIDEWATER COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Being in the right place at the right time, Tidewater Community College President Deborah M. DiCroce envisioned a cultural arts/educational center to stand as a core block for its Norfolk campus. Opened in 2000, the Jeanne and George Roper Performing Arts Center has realized her vision and contributed significantly to what has been described as downtown Norfolk's "Renaissance." Built in 1926 as the Loew's State Theater, and hailed at the time as "Dixie's Million Dollar Dandy," the restored facility reopened with a major concert hall and a more intimate black box studio theater with flex seating, appealing to a variety of audiences.

Restored to its original opulence with gilded box seats, glass chandeliers and ornate, hand-painted architectural details, the Roper has been lauded by theater critics as "a cathedral to the past." It now hosts the range of the performing arts as well as feature films, college convocations, commencements and symposia. Comfortably seating up to 900 patrons, this vibrant centerpiece of the downtown entertainment district has been fitted out with state-of-the-art technology, enabling the production of the most complex and demanding staged presentations. Coordinating more than 160 events a year, ranging from Jazz on Granby concerts and gospel shows to the Jewish Film Festival, is general manager Paul Lasakow, who is professionally under the purview of the Virginia Arts Festival. Managing the self-sufficient facility calls for skill in balancing numerous acts and events. However, after the Roper's primary resident theater group, the Commonwealth, went under last year, it has felt a significant vacuum for dramatic presentations. Groups like the Hurrah Players are filling the void.

The roomy Roper boasts 862 seats and an incredible Dolby sound system. Customer satisfaction is high. However, TCC's 20,000 students have limited access to the stage and there exists no costume room or second stage for rehearsal. This giant venue, with its state-of-the-art equipment, was not built with a vision for a student theater program. However, on the TCC Chesapeake campus, faculty director Ed Jacobs runs a remarkable, albeit reduced, drama program, feeding amazing talent on to advanced training and into the Hampton Roads theatrical pool, and supporting directors like Lisa Neely and familiar productions including "Our Town" and "Medea."

L. DOUGLAS WILDER CENTER AT NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY

Named after the former Virginia governor, the L. Douglas Wilder Performing Arts Center is situated on the campus of Norfolk State University and showcases the creative works of African American directors and actors. A luxurious venue with elegant curvilinear designs and seating for 1,800, the center specializes in musical performances, from classical to jazz, and a visiting lecture series, featuring the likes of the Rev. T. D. Jakes.

Promoting the center's vision to "educate, enlighten and entertain through the presentation of artistic events of excellence and diversity in the performing arts and thereby ensure the viability of art in all its forms," the Wilder Center offers a venue for performances committed to an African American focus. Built upon the now defunct Norfolk Players Guild, one of the oldest black performing groups in the country, the Norfolk State University Players is headed by Professor Clarence Murray. They perform two major productions a year, such as "The Wiz," present children's productions and workshops, and perform as "vagabond" players at churches and community sites. Although the group connects classic Greek theater to modern realism, its performances emphasize mainstream educational theater.

HOFHEIMER THEATRE AT VIRGINIA WESLEYAN COLLEGE

Under the expert guidance of faculty Sally Shedd and Travis Malone, the Virginia Wesleyan College theater program sparkles like a tiny but brilliant diamond in the rough. Sharing two very modest performance spaces with a strong musical program, the theater department is housed in the oldest building on an impressively growing campus that showcases athletics (2006 NCAA Division III men's basketball champions) and student life. The theater is as well loved, well used and well worn as the Velveteen Rabbit. Its program remains as well conceived as any in the area, with its visionary directors charting a four-year plan of exposure to a broad and lively range of dramatic literature. Students receive invaluable personal guidance and schooling in sundry modes of performance, from classical to modern, and vaudevillian to musical. The program focuses on exceptionally talented students, who enjoy the boon of expert mentoring and direction.

REGENT UNIVERSITY

The impressive and fairly recently constructed theater of Regent University fits the classic Georgian architecture of the campus. Equipped for acoustical perfection and digital technological sophistication, the grand stage frequently hosts the Virginia Symphony as well as a variety of innovative theatrical performances, notably Professor Gillette Elvgren's wildly imaginative and hilarious adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. The venue offers a unique opportunity for integration of the theatrical arts and the Christian faith, reviving the fertile artistic tradition of the church in producing miracle and morality plays.

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

The human nexus bridging the professional and academic worlds of Hampton Roads theater is Christopher Hanna. Since moving from Broadway, where he was an assistant to Joseph Papp, Hanna has sparkled in the great white lights and energized all he has touched. He brings a creative synergy to his roles as director/coordinator of theater for Old Dominion University and as artistic director of the Virginia Stage Company, the professional equity theater in Norfolk. Alternating as teacher, director, producer, mentor and one of the brightest lights of the theatrical community, Hanna has nurtured the Wells Theatre's new play program, winning grants and praise from the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as the Guggenheim and Rockefeller foundations. He also heads the company's Professional Theatre School.

Partnering with Hanna is Erlene Hendrix, a faculty member in ODU's Department of Communication and Theatre Arts and its chief academic adviser. The university's theatrical season usually offers a mix of classical work, contemporary plays and world premieres. Demonstrating an exemplary pre-professional quality for an undergraduate program, advanced acting students are eligible, through auditions, to receive financial scholarships while earning Actors Equity credit by assuming stage roles at the VSC as part of their course of study. Working out of a quaint, refurbished old milking and horse police station, the Stables Theatre, the program proffers a full range of courses in performance, design technology, history/theory and production, with additional specialization in both theater education and digital filmmaking. The resident faculty are augmented every year by nationally recognized guest artists, adding further expertise in specific styles and craft areas, as well as providing students with contacts in the professional theater world and entertainment industry.

GOVERNOR'S SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS

One final distinguished academic program must be mentioned, namely, the Governor's School for the Arts (GSA). One of the best-kept secrets of Hampton Roads, the GSA provides a wonderful development program, enrolling talented high school kids from the area and giving them a taste of college life and master classes in performing arts. The cast of a recent production of Virginia Repertory Theatre Company's "Beauty and the Beast" consisted of GSA students, in partnership with the Virginia Gateway Center for the Arts.



THEATER PERFORMING COMPANIES

Moving from the spacious, but aesthetically challenging Virginia Beach Pavilion, the keenly adaptable and visionary founder and managing director Jeff Meredith transported his semi-professional *Virginia Musical Theatre* (VMT) to the more comfortable Contemporary Arts Center in Virginia Beach. Augmenting local talent with imported union professionals, the VMT strives for guild-scale acting, and channels energy and skill into showy productions of old, new and revival hits like "Big River."

According to Meredith, the VMT is one of the most unique arts organizations in Hampton Roads, being "fully committed to only musical theater." Even its educational programs focus on the genre. It offers a splendid platform for aspiring young professionals to break a leg with talented professionals from around the country. In response to its interim move to the smaller, intimate setting of the Contemporary Arts Center, the VMT plans more economic, but playful, programs of "My Way" and Sondheim's "Side by Side," as it awaits the construction of the 1,200-seat Sandler Center for the Performing Arts at Virginia Beach. Yet, like other groups, Meredith says it seeks to be liberated from "being a slave to the bottom line" of a \$500,000 budget, that it might undertake a more adventurous and artistically daring series. However, he astutely recognizes this is not yet a market that would support such risk taking.

In 2002, New York pros Robert Ruffin and Mary Watkins co-founded the *Playwrights Premiere Theatre* (PPT) as Williamsburg's resident full-time, professional theater company with the purpose of giving new scripts fully realized, professional-quality productions. Mingling new works with small-cast established favorites (for example, "Copenhagen," "Long Day's Journey into Night," "History of Rock, Volume I"), the PPT performs at the Kimball Theatre in Merchants Square. Both educational and touring activities offer an experience of walking through the development of a typical production, such as "The Waiting Room." Drawing upon a gifted pool of talented actors and teachers in Colonial Williamsburg, the PPT offers what one critic called "crème de la crème performances," ranging from theater of the absurd to Bob Arthur's "Poetry Plays on the Chesapeake Bay," while trying to do "shoestring theatre."

Besides managing the Roper theater for the Virginia Arts Festival, Rob Cross is also responsible for the newly renovated *Crispus Attucks Theatre and Cultural Center*, the historic black theater designed, owned and operated entirely by African Americans since 1919. Once known as the "Apollo of the South," the prominent entertainment center hosted the exceptional talents of StageNorfolk's executive director Michael LeMelle in the world premiere of George Faison's "If This Hat Could Talk," the story of Dorothy Height. Under the leadership of Terrance Afer-Anderson, StageNorfolk is making dramatic inroads in such venues.

Local theater critic Montague Gammon III defined "the essence of community theatre" as existing "for people involved in productions; it is their avocation." This doesn't change their goal, however, of putting on a good dramatic show.

Good shows abound with the *Williamsburg Players*. Approaching their 50th year celebration, Williamsburg's oldest community theater inaugurated their first season in 1957 with "Teahouse of the August Moon." Since then, the Players have faithfully fulfilled their motto, to provide "community theatre at its best," offering mystery, suspense and romantic dramas. Awaiting construction of the James-York Playhouse, the company continues to discover new plays and playwrights, often through its creative use of Readers' Theatre.



Maximizing a fresh outdoor venue, Ann Russell Taylor's Summer Shakes Inc., aka *Shakespeare by the Sea*, produces the Hampton Roads Shakespeare Festival as free public performances at Seatack Neighborhood Park in Virginia Beach. While constrained by weather, the production company oversees about 15 performances a season, adding educational pre-shows to introduce children to the Bard's works. Forthcoming this season will be "The Taming of the Shrew," underwritten in large part by donations. Directed by Grace Atkinson and offering high-quality family entertainment with an emphasis on the classics, the 1994 incorporated company hosts a theater for children and teens, whetting a taste for Shakespeare in a broader community. Other outdoor theaters, such as Shakespeare in the Grove on the Tidewater Community College Chesapeake campus, are delightful and important parts of the community and collegiate mix.

A spotlight on the smaller community theaters of Hampton Roads illuminates the cornucopia of local theatrical talent. Blending the professional and the amateur – those who love the theater and follow an avocational calling – the little-theater movement enriches and delights audiences throughout the region.

One of the country's oldest continually operating theaters is the *Little Theatre of Norfolk*, almost 80 years in existence. Tucked away in West Ghent, the "grande dame of local performing arts" started out in an old drafty stable in the Norfolk bowery in 1926. While its theater floor is bowed and sinking, and seats on a slant look up at a straightforward proscenium, it remains one of the most vigorous and energetic volunteer associations of actors and artisans, even launching the careers of stars like Margaret Sullivan and Tilden Davis. The 224-seat art deco venue welcomes all, practicing a charitable community outreach program to disabled and elderly patrons. A financially free nonprofit organization, the theater has an annual budget of \$50,000, which is underwritten by prominent merchants and citizens. But as past president Eunice Pittman notes, "We know how to pinch a penny." Artistic director Mark Haynie has selected plays like "Rebecca" and "M*A*S*H*" for the upcoming season.

With a reputation as being one of the most underfinanced organizations and having a limited talent pool, the *Little Theatre of Portsmouth* (LTP) valiantly holds its own in serving its community. Forced out of its quiet suburban neighborhood venue of the Woodrow Wilson High School auditorium after an arsonist destroyed its sets, props and costumes, the LTP found charity in the Monumental United Methodist Church, where coincidentally the organization began as the Monumental Players in 1937. Former director Alice Everheart asserts "the show will go on," as the LTP presents lively productions of its own "LTP Follies" and "The Dinner Party."

The most wide-ranging and consistently lauded community theater remains the *Little Theatre of Virginia Beach* (LTVB). Nestled within a residential neighborhood near the Contemporary Arts Center of Virginia Beach, the theater provides top-notch entertainment on its thrust stage. This all-volunteer and nonprofit organization, presided over by Shirley Hurd, attracts full houses with its presentations of works like the C.S. Lewis story "Shadowlands" and the romantic "Enchanted April." Its only drawback stems from noise, both from jets and rain on its metal roof, problems the board is currently addressing. Yet LTVB holds the noteworthy critical distinction of offering the area's best and most consistent performances of community theater, with five affordable, high-quality shows a year. President Bill Vaughn points to the inclusive involvement of people from all walks of life in the LTVB, with volunteers for both backstage work and performance. With a trim budget of \$85,000, the LTVB fills its 155 seats by presenting a successful formula of mystery, musical comedy and hybrids. It frequently extends its menu with special shows like the upcoming

"Shakespeare in Hollywood," a hilarious comedy in which characters from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" get lost on a Hollywood set; "The Living," about the 17th-century plague in London; and the aptly chosen, self-reflexive show about over-the-hill, egoistic opera singers, "Quartet." Little Theatre of Virginia Beach stands as one of the best options in local theatrical entertainment.

The Newport News Little Theatre merged with the Hampton Little Theatre to bestow the community a gift in the form of the *Peninsula Community Theatre* (PCT). Its distinctive bill shines with sparkling children's productions, performed five times a year. Frequently playing in high school auditoriums, its most notable venue is the Village Theatre in historic Hilton Village, a movie house converted for live performances. Behind the leadership of community volunteers like Patricia Stern, the PCT aims at securing a "venue for local talent to perform in as professional a setting as possible." Creativity is especially evident in the PCT's children's theater productions of "The Jungle Book" and "Song of Mulan." Along with other community theaters in the region, the PCT benefits from the "bird-flocking" phenomenon of actors keenly watching to see what plays are being planned and who is auditioning.

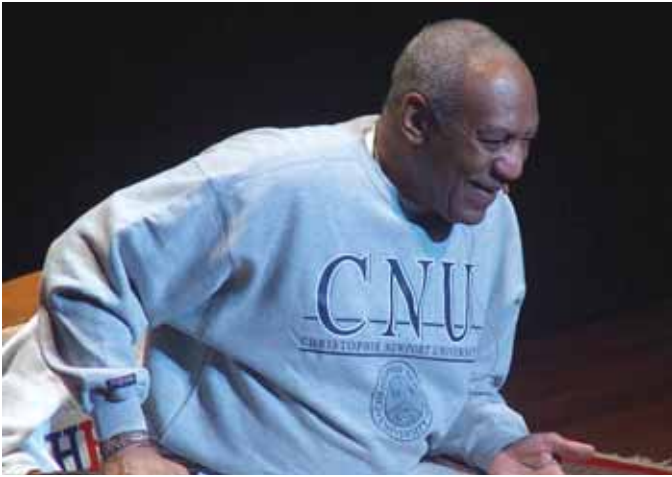
Other lesser-known, but talented groups also find habitat in Hampton Roads, including the *Poquoson Island Players*, whose entertaining plays like "South Pacific" are primarily aimed at military base personnel, and the *Smithfield Little Theatre*, which frequently explodes with productions like "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." The youth theater, *Rite of Passage Experience Theater Company* (ROPE), aims at creating and encouraging metamorphoses through the performing and visual arts. Coming out of Hampton University's theater program, it offers ensemble programs for adults and children, performing at school assemblies and staging a reenactment of the Lord's Supper at churches.

The *Patchwork Players Children's Theatre*, based in Chesapeake, positions itself as a morality-based professional company, offering a high-quality and educational theatrical experience for children from kindergarten through high school. Previous seasons produced memorable musicals like "Grease" and classic children's stories including "Alice in Wonderland."

Few theaters are integrated into their immediate community as the *Yoder Barn Theatre* in Newport News. Once a cow barn, this hayloft venue was refurbished into one of the most unique theaters of the region. Ongoing musical and theatrical presentations build upon Yoder's signature production of "Pieced Together," chronicling the Mennonite community's 100-year history with a blend of traditional hymns, oral tradition, indigenous folk music and memory, all woven into an exquisite tapestry. Director Christine Yoder hopes to bring more folk opera pieces to the 200-seat theater-in-the-round, retelling the nostalgic and visionary stories of Greek and Italian communities. With its rustic charm and Gothic arch roof, the historic Peninsula landmark puts on Broadway-style musicals and a special Yoder Barn Half Pint Children's Series of fairy tales and other stories. The Yoder's vision is to present authentic folk art forms of theater, keeping memory alive and entertaining.

The performing company with the largest and most vocal following is artistic director Hugh Copeland's *Hurrah Players*. Decidedly a family theater company, Hurrah Players coordinates six polished, full-staged musicals a year. Dedicated to the idea that children learn by doing, Copeland fosters joyous learning experiences through a variety of performance-oriented instruction, not only teaching drama skills, dancing, singing and stagecraft, but also instilling a deep, loyal and contagious appreciation for the theater. While performing in locales ranging from London to Disney World, the Hurrah Players also generously performs regionally for many who might not be able to attend live theatrical performances. The peripatetic troupe roams from its base at the Roper Center in Norfolk to schools, civic centers and charities throughout Hampton Roads. Mounting primarily classic children's tales, such as the upcoming "Peter Pan," "Seussical ... the Musical" and "Snow White Goes West," shows also have dealt with more serious themes, including the environment and death. Hurrah Players' successful presence since 1984 testifies to the ongoing importance of underwriting such a valuable endeavor, not only making the dreams of actors come true, but also guiding other children into worlds of dreams and hopes.

The 25-year-old radical upstart *Generic Theatre* in Norfolk's historic Ghent district continues to hold its offbeat niche as the region's primary off-Broadway playhouse. Its annual New Plays for Dog Days Festival in late summer attracts new plays by scores of playwrights for inaugural premiers, offering experimental theater followed by lively and animated discussions with playwrights, actors and local denizens. Rooted in the city's parks and recreation department and underwritten by the Virginia and Norfolk Commissions for the Arts, the Generic, whose name derives from the idea of "theater in a plain wrapper," has developed a prickly reputation for testing the limits. Its risk-taking independence and artistic merits are enabled by the generosity of the city of Norfolk, which continues to pay rent for this 80-seat theater on 21st Street.



After internal fighting and the removal of several directors, the Generic, as critic Montague Gammon III noted in a March 13, 2006, interview, is “in flux.” Yet, Gammon added that it has “an opportunity to re-invent itself,” and to continue its progressive tradition of edgy, topical, controversial and sometimes hilariously wacky works. Recent works have remained edgy, such as “Frozen,” a play that humanizes pedophiles and challenges a restorative justice. Board member Patty Ray recognizes that it is not unusual for nonprofit organizations to go through change; in fact, finding the right fit of leadership is strategic to a growing, creative management. The challenges of relocation and restructuring occurring at the same time offer a fresh opportunity to grow. What remains starkly evident is the tension between the theater’s financial stability and its need to play to popular audience tastes. In its mission to develop innovative plays, the Generic remains committed to new

play development, “corralling off” designated funds so that it might cultivate its Playwrights’ Forum and Dog Days Festival.

Although not in direct competition with the Generic, Norfolk’s *40th Street Stage* shares a common mission, offering an intimate 70-seat theater with notable flexibility. This nontraditional space offers audiences raw theatrical experiences. Often in collaboration with the 40th Street Stage, the sometimes-resident *Elizabeth River Theatre Company* (ERT) is more an itinerant and innovative enfant terrible among local troupes, where everything from “Der Fledermaus” and one-act “cosmic comic-romantic fables” to performance art and interactive audience improvisation and spiritual theater can be on the bill.

Already in its brief history, the ERT has earned a progressive reputation for intensely acted and provocative shows. It has demonstrated a commitment to do its own bold and adventurous works and to develop a sophisticated theatrical palate in Hampton Roads audiences. Motivated by the non-bourgeoisie idea that theater can happen anywhere, the ever-changing ERT began performing in “found spaces” (office buildings, parlors, etc.) before it temporarily shared its current location. Emerging from an organic process of stage production, the ERT does not perform traditional theatrical seasons. Rather, artistic directors Gerald Schwarz and Jim Turner, managing director Frankie Little Hardin and technical director Scott Quirk find shows that display the talents of the Hampton Roads-based acting community. Once the artistic staff selects the proper show, the team works carefully to produce a cohesive product that communicates a relevant artistic statement for the community. Its venues have ranged from an office tower to an old house in Portsmouth.

Key to understanding part of the success of the community theater circuit is to recognize the “removable feast” of good peripatetic actors who wander from show to show. The casting of certain high-quality actors draws fellow artists to audition for a particular show, usually making it a notable success.

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

Several excellent Southside theatrical organizations already mentioned (VSC, VOA, VMT, Generic Theatre and Hurrah Players) received munificent general operating financial support from The Norfolk Foundation’s Business Consortium for Arts Support, a nonprofit that coordinates support from local area businesses and foundations, with the greater percentage of its funds being awarded to the region’s largest arts organizations. For these nonprofit arts groups, the consortium is the greatest source of unearned income.

In 2003, H. Blount Hunter Retail and Real Estate Research Co. conducted a thorough project on performing arts for the Norfolk Commission for the Arts, attempting to quantify the possible economic impact of cultural arts on the southeastern Virginia region (<http://www.norfolkdevelopment.com/arts-culture/documents/survey2004.pdf>). According to the study, “The return-on-investment in small-audience organizations was greater in FY-03 than among large-audience organizations, although the absolute dollar value of net positive fiscal impact from large-audience organizations was greater than the dollar value of net fiscal impact of small-audience organizations.” Various organizations benefited from additional subscriptions and coordinated marketing. However, others outside Norfolk did not. As one arts leader noted, certain organizations were favored. Often, too, one had to

fight the “big elephant” on the visiting stage, namely that there is only so much discretionary income to go around, and this past year “The Lion King” ate it all up.

A related and somewhat haunting concern swirls around whether local theater is close to the point of saturation, even with the Virginia Arts Festival trying to produce entertainment year-round. “We are not Chicago or Philly,” notes American Theatre artistic director Michael Curry, “and yet it has suddenly become ‘sexy’ to build a theater.” Virginia Beach is planning the opening of its cultural “urban center,” the Sandler Center for the Performing Arts, in 2007. The city has committed \$35 million from meal and hotel taxes to support the Sandler. Located in its emerging Town Center, this professional-quality center for the arts will feature a premier 1,200-seat state-of-the-art concert hall. Curry suggests that perhaps one should look first at the struggles of the Virginia Stage Company and the dreamy visions of Chesapeake and Suffolk to build and see if “they” will come.

The two key issues to be addressed concern the economy and the audiences. First, what will the decelerating economy of Hampton Roads support? As Curry voiced it, “There seems to be less expendable money. If one spends \$40 at the amphitheater, what is left behind? While the arts organizations need to cooperate and work together, all must realistically recognize that there is not unlimited potential. For example, the competition for movies is now that one can buy a DVD of a film for \$10 at Target. What will happen to theater?”

Second, will an audience of theatrical connoisseurs develop that will appreciate more than large, known, entertaining shows? Many theatrical directors have expressed concern that a sophisticated theatrical palate must be carefully and intentionally cultivated so that the menu for Hampton Roads may be as diverse as its population.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is worth noting the lingering words of wisdom from Montague Gammon III, namely, that “the most important assets for the performing arts in Hampton Roads are not the bricks and mortar, but the visionary individuals who give their lives and energies to the arts.” Not only is the region’s history of theater grounded in people like Chris Hanna, Michael Curry, Rob Cross, Jeff Meredith, Gillette Elvgren, Erlene Hendrix, Hugh Copeland, and the talented and dedicated faculties of Hampton Roads’ academic theater departments, but the future of our area’s performing arts also resides in them. These are living stones that make for a splendid monument of theater in Hampton Roads.

THEATERS AND PERFORMING ARTS COMPANIES PHOTOS

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